



Ambassador Jeffrey L. Bleich – At the Pacific Women's Empowerment Policy Dialogue

Remarks of Ambassador Bleich at the Pacific Women's Empowerment Policy Dialogue: Stopping Violence Against Women

(As prepared for delivery – November 2, 2011)

Honorable Minister Kate Ellis,

Honorable Richard Marles, Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs,

Ambassador Penny Williams,

Distinguished guests.

It's a pleasure to be here this evening. I'd like to join with Secretary Marles in welcoming you to this joint Australia - U.S. policy dialogue, Stopping Violence Against Women.

Events like this are a sign of great progress. For most of history, even the most progressive governments, have avoided dealing with the issue of domestic violence. The U.S. and Australia are no exception. Our governments treated it as a private matter. If you watch old movies from the 30s, or 40s, or 50s, you will see images of men hitting their wives or girlfriends, and there are no police cars rushing to the scene. No safe houses or shelters. No family counseling programs. Part of this was ignorance about the real effects of domestic violence. A big part of it was sexism. Men ran our governments, and it was not their issue.

But brave women came out of the shadows and began to tell their stories. They began campaigns to educate the public, to strengthen laws against violence, to train hospital workers and police to recognize the signs of abuse, to give women safe places to go, and to give support for their children. The campaign made tremendous progress. But even with this progress, there have still been two significant barriers to ending gender violence.

The first significant barrier was the belief – held by men and women alike – that violence against women is a woman's issue. But it is every bit as much a man's issue. Men are responsible for most of this violence. Over 80% of all domestic violence is perpetrated by men. Men also largely define our response to violence. If other men tolerate it, or



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ignore the signs, or blame the women who have been abused, then this tells abusers that it is not a big deal.

The other significant barrier is the belief that this is a local issue. Violence against women, anywhere, is not a local issue. It is an issue that destroys communities, it degrades entire societies, and it has no respect for borders.

This conference reflects how these barriers are starting to fall. In the 1990s, people from many nations started to take action together to address gender violence. The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women was adopted in 1993, and the next year the United States passed the Violence Against Women Act. The year after that, in Beijing, then-First Lady Hillary Clinton called on people around the world to respect the rights of women in all societies, and to end domestic abuse.

And men began stepping up to this challenge. About 10 years ago, on Father’s Day, I joined with 350 men in the United States, including then-Senator Joe Biden, in calling on men to take a stand against domestic violence. On that Father’s Day, and each Father’s Day since, we published an open letter in the New York Times calling on Congress and private individuals to help build an international center for the study and prevention of domestic violence. And that center is now built and will open its doors in January.

Today, Joe Biden is our Vice-President and Hillary Clinton is our Secretary of State. And at the highest levels of government – in the White House, in the State Department, and in State Capitols across the U.S. – ending domestic violence is now a core commitment. It is not just some peripheral issue.

When he came into office, President Obama appointed a first-ever White House Advisor on Violence Against Women, Lynn Rosenthal. Secretary Clinton appointed a first-ever Ambassador for Global Women’s Issues, Melanne Verveer, to champion these issues, to inspire change, and to recognize champions. Tina Tchen, here with us in Canberra as head of the U.S. delegation, was President Obama’s first Director of Public Engagement, where she too made this a priority. I recall that first Father’s Day at the White House, President Obama’s message focused on enlisting men and dads in the effort to stop violence against women. Over the past three years, we have strengthened enforcement of the Violence Against Women Act and we have worked to pass stricter measures including the International Violence Against Women Act. Indeed, this past month has been National Domestic Violence Month in the United States with education programs across our Country.

Governments are coming together to do all this in part because of the moral duty to prevent this type of suffering. But our governments also do this because we want a healthy society. There are few things as corrosive to the human spirit or to a society as



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violence against women. Despite these efforts, today one in three women in this world still experience gender-based violence in her lifetimes. The result of that violence is often mothers who cannot care for themselves or their families, who miss work, who are physically injured, who are raped and infected with disease, and who have no recourse or hope. It is fathers who live with self-loathing and who are hated by their own children. And it is children who feel trapped and lost and helpless, who can't study, who can't concentrate, who live in fear, and who don't know how to solve problems except with more violence. Violence in the home leads to a vicious cycle of violence, poverty, and disease that destroys societies.

This is why we come together. This policy dialogue stems from an agreement a year ago, announced in Melbourne by Secretary Clinton and Foreign Minister Rudd that our two nations would be partners in addressing violence against women globally. And Australia has had outstanding leadership from its own Global Ambassador for Women and Girls, Penny Williams.

We are starting with a plan: the National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security. First, it focuses on urgent care. The plan will work to ensure that survivors of gender-based violence receive legal, medical, and other assistance. Second, it addresses the need for prevention. It will strengthen the role of peacekeepers in preventing and responding to violence against women in conflict zones. Third, it will define the systems needed to stop violence against women and change public attitudes, and it will help us do more to investigate incidents of violence against women and bring those responsible to justice.

Within the State Department, our focus is global. The Office of Global Women's Issues is committed to partnerships with local organizations to change the rules. For example, in Cambodia, where women and girls have been attacked with acid, we are helping local leaders to end gender-based violence, through public education and advocacy. We're helping Albania develop legislation against domestic violence. We've supported Benin's landmark legislation to address sexual harassment. And we're working with governmental stakeholders to develop new laws on trafficking in persons in Mozambique.

Our Agency for International Development, USAID, has invested worldwide in giving women a real voice in their societies by ensuring their power to vote, to reform laws, to receive a quality education, to have maternal care, and to have an opportunity for economic growth. Sixty-seven percent of its education programs focus on girls' education. Sixty percent of USAID's microfinance loans go to women. And nearly one-third of the clients receiving USAID-supported business training are women. These programs improve the status of women and expand opportunities for all women and girls.



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However, we also know that stopping violence against women will require more than governments’ efforts. It will require concentrated efforts on many fronts. It will require non-profit organizations, grassroots activists and citizen leaders to pull together with government, people like you. So tonight, I applaud you, the delegates to this important policy dialogue. In your communities and in projects throughout the Pacific region, you are leading in this critical effort.

Ending violence against women is not the work of a day or even a year. It is a generational effort to change attitudes. It is about father’s respecting the wives and mothers who brought their children into this world; it is about teaching our daughters that no one has the right to mistreat them; and it is about teaching our sons that violence does not equal strength. It is about recognizing the equal role of women in our society; it is about recognizing that in a global world no society can afford to tolerate gender-based violence. No community can afford to forfeit the true economic and social potential of half of its population; and no community can afford to tolerate a system that degrades and diminishes all of its people.

That is our mission, and I wish you great success in this policy dialogue and in the hard work that will follow.